

End of Frexit, bad for Brexit? Macron's win signals France's resurgence in Europe

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*Emmanuel Macron's win in the French presidential elections not only means the death of 'Frexit', but has wide-ranging implications not just for the European project, but also for the ongoing Brexit negotiations. His victory will give Europe a resurgent strength and a leader who is not only passionate about the project but willing and able to be a strong presence in an international arena where France has been missing since the end of the Sarkozy administration. However, with a cornucopia of domestic issues, and the economic constraints of the Franco-British relationship, his impact on Brexit will be mixed, writes **Joseph Downing**.*



In November 2016 Emmanuel Macron entered the French presidential campaign without a party and running on a centrist, pro-Europe platform. In the shadow of Brexit and with rumours of a eurosceptic wave sweeping the continent many saw this as pure insanity with zero chance of success. Only 6 months later he stands as France's first elected president in a generation not hailing from one of the two major parties – the centre-left socialists or the centre-right republicans. In one of the strangest political upsets in what has been a year of political firsts, Macron's election demonstrates that it has been easy to overstate the importance of Euroscepticism as an issue in an election fought on an extremely diverse set of political fronts.



Image

by [enmarchefr](#) (Instagram).

This presidential campaign has been beset with such a plethora of wide-ranging issues it has been hard to pick apart what is driving voters' behaviour. The far-right Marine Le Pen and the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon polled 40% of the first round votes on two very different but highly Eurosceptic platforms. Le Pen, who in the second round polled around 33.9 per cent of the final vote even went as far as to promise a 'Frexit' referendum on France's EU membership and succeed domestically from the Euro, moves that would have thrown Europe into a turmoil from which it may never have fully recovered from.

However, it is too easy to read these successes as products of a deep sense of euroscepticism. Importantly, both candidates had extremely wide-ranging campaigns which covered a large swathe of political concerns – for Le Pen

migration and security, for Melenchon economic precarity and the need to resist public spending cuts. While both of these issues do have European dimensions – austerity and the Schengen agreement in the cases of public spending and migration, neither of these two issues can be boiled down to the European dimension alone. The migrant crisis of the past two years has far wider international roots in the Syrian conflict, the Arab spring and the ongoing unrest in Asia and Africa. For austerity, Melenchon blames the European constitution for imposing fiscal norms on the French. However, it is important to remember that this was accepted by a coalition of right and left parties in France who went against the democratic mandate to reject it. Thus this was not forced upon France by an international organisation but by domestic, democratically elected politicians.

This failure of the main domestic political institutions is far from lost on French voters and neither has it been conflated with being members of the EU. One of the key drivers for a presidential election between two candidates from outside the historical norms of French politics is precisely a product of two presidents, Sarkozy on the right and Hollande on the left, who have seen to be failures on the domestic scene on a diverse range of issues. Here, for French voters, the EU is the least of their worries when domestic politics in is disarray.

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Where does this leave the UK as it slowly leaves the EU? A Le Pen win would have shaken Europe to the core and created a highly uncertain backdrop to Brexit negotiations. Macrons win, on the other hand, is likely to give a backdrop of continuity and European resurgence to the negotiations that will have important impacts for Brexit. No longer will France be conspicuous by its absence in Europe, as Hollande was one of the least active French presidents in living memory vis-à-vis the EU. Macron is likely to take a much more central role in Europe. The UK is France's 3rd [most important export market](#) behind the USA and Germany and France is thus highly unlikely to support a 'hard' Brexit. However, Macron has also publically committed to not letting the UK dictate terms to the trading bloc, and as such negotiations are likely to be long, complicated and convoluted. This will present Theresa May with important challenges in facing down a Europe now contain and resurgent France with Macron at the helm.

Macron will not be a unipolar president on Europe

However, Macron will also not be a unipolar president on Europe as many of the issues upon which he has staked his political future have important dimensions that also require him to have an assertive hand with Brussels. While he supports Europe he also publically supports its reform. Domestically, he is also going to be kept extremely busy with ongoing security concerns and the need to be seen to push through the reforms and deliver the economic growth that he has promised the French. He also will have to build some kind of governing coalition in the senate before and after the parliamentary elections in June. This is going to be a real challenge to a leader that does not have a party as such, and where the 40% of the vote going to the far left and far right could mean losses for the more centrist parties he will be relying on to help him govern.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics. Image by [enmarchefr](#) (Instagram).

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